

LITTLE INCIDENTS DEPICTED BY JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG



JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG

Copyright Harper & Bros

HE MET HIS WIFE DOWN TOWN—NOT BY APPOINTMENT

TELLS OF SUCCESSFUL FIGHT TO FREE HIMSELF FROM COCAINE SLAVERY

Personal Narrative of Man Who Was a Victim of the Drug for Six Years and Who Was Able to Redeem Himself.

This is the personal narrative of a fairly prosperous business man of New York who, having fallen below the level of his fellows through drink, plunged on down the social scale until he became a confirmed cocaine user and Bowers derelict. "My status in society," he writes, "is best illustrated when I was kicked out of one of the lowest dives on Park Row with the announcement by the bouncer that I was a disgrace to the place." The man has been reclaimed and is now fighting his way back to what he calls civilization.

I STOOD on a prominent Broadway corner the other morning with a feeling of elation I had not experienced since the days back in my home town in Missouri when the circus bill posters began their annual spring decorations on barns and fences. I was full of eager anticipation then, and so was I upon this morning.

I had just been given employment as a city salesman at \$18 a week. In my friends who knew me when I was in active control of a going business my feeling of elation would probably have aroused a sense of deep pity. It is true that to the man of 33 with a family of five dependent upon him there is nothing extremely encouraging about securing an \$18 a week job, but to me it meant a rebuilding of life after sipping the bitterest drops in the underworld of New York for six years.

I came to New York when I was 20, secured a clerkship in a commission house on West street, and in three years was assistant to the general manager. Not content I offered my services to a larger firm in a different line at less money. They took me and at 32 I was in control of the business at a salary of \$6,000 a year and a share in the profits. I was married and had four children. I do not believe a happier family could be found. I had never tasted drink. I did not smoke and indeed I believe that I was what might be called a "model man." I was of an easygoing temperament and nothing worried me for any great length of time. When my wife showed symptoms of "nerves" I thought her silly and childish and told her so. I know what "nerves" mean now.

We lived well and managed to save several thousands of dollars. We had unfortunately never purchased a home owing to our desire to have the children in the school near our apartment house.

I tell these simple facts merely to show that there was no excuse for the sudden change in my character. I had everything to live for and certainly every reason to live an exemplary life.

My first step in my fall from grace came about through entertaining a party of convivial friends from my home town. From time to time the home newspapers had spoken flatteringly of my success in New York and

in that way all of my friends knew my address. Four of them came to New York and looked me up.

It is a habit people have when they come to New York, that of "looking you up." It is one of the curses of city life. It wouldn't be so if they came to call on you at your home, but they do not do that. You must show them the sights.

There were no women in the party and my wife asked to be excused from going with us. I started out to show my friends the city. Really all I knew about Broadway life was an occasional dinner in one of the garish restaurants in the neighborhood of Forty-second street. I suggested a dinner at one of these cafes and we went there. I became a drunkard that night.

When we had been seated a round of cocktails was ordered. I declined to drink and all looked at me puzzled.

"Live in New York and never drink?" said one.

"That beats me," added another, but I smiled and stuck to a mild soft drink. Their talk drifted to my success in New York. I could see there was a great deal of admiration for the progress I had made and secretly I was flattered. Spurred on by this buoyancy I agreed to drink to old times in a bottle of wine. Before the evening was over I had consumed nine or ten glasses of wine and was presented with a check calling for \$45. It was my first taste of high life.

The wine gave me a tingle I had never experienced before and going home in the subway I felt a sort of mental glow. Life was never more worth while to me. I walked steadily, but I felt a great exhilaration. My wife was waiting for me and the moment I entered the room I saw her wince. She had smelled the fumes of liquor. I was abashed too, but I retired and said nothing about the evening with my friends. The next morning at breakfast my wife's eyes were red and I knew she had been weeping—she was given to tears on the slightest provocation.

I didn't feel very guilty. It was my first offense and I reflected that I had enjoyed it. I couldn't forget the tingle. I rather made up my mind that I was going to get around more. I was sticking too close to business. I did get out more.

I began drinking a cocktail at lunch

just for the tingle. I realized too I was playing with fire and there was a voice of warning, but I heeded it not. I was on the toboggan.

It was only a few months until I felt an absolute craving for liquor. In my bathroom in a bottle labeled "poison," to deceive my wife, I kept whiskey. Every morning I had an "eye opener." I was becoming acquainted with a new crowd and I was going down town frequently at night.

I knew I was neglecting business, but in my egotism I felt that I had won so firm a footing with my concern that my services were indispensable. There was a rude awakening. Five months after I began to drink a directors' meeting was called and I was present, nervous from a bad night before.

I was told firmly and with scant apology that I was no longer wanted. They forced me out over night and my assistant took my place.

I shall never forget the physical numbness that overcame me on the way home, and then suddenly there was an electrifying moment such as comes in time of catastrophe and my brain was clear. "I still have a chance," I said so loud that several persons in the car stared at me. I will always believe that if I had taken a grip on myself at that precious moment my life would have been different. I didn't grasp the opportunity.

I didn't have to tell my wife that something was wrong; she knew it by my expression. She wormed it out of me that night and then went to bed with a violent sick headache, and I went out the next morning and did not see her or my children again for more than a year.

I was drunk before I left the house, having consumed the contents of a fresh bottle of "poison" in the bathroom. When I came to my senses after a four weeks riotous spree I was in Bellevue Hospital, strapped down. I sent immediately for my wife. The messenger returned with the statement that the family in the adjoining apartment said my wife and children had taken the household effects and returned to her home in Missouri.

This was the most crushing blow I had received. Instead of arousing me, however, it only plunged me deeper into despair. I remained in the hospital several days, and when I started to leave I happened to glance in a mirror in the waiting room. I stood rooted to the spot for several seconds. There was a red rear over one cheek and across the bridge of my nose. They told me little about it except that I had been mixed up in a nasty fight and a bottle of vitriol had been hurled at me.

I made for the nearest saloon and began to drink again. I had been cashing checks right and left, and the next morning when I went to my bank I learned that my debauch had cost me \$1,800.

Before night I was off again on another wild spree. My entire savings were gone in a year. I had left the haunts of Broadway and my new home

was in a cramped up sort of place over a fruit store on Bleeker street. I became a nuisance to my friends, and one man whose wife was an intimate friend of my wife's ordered me out of his office for begging among his employees.

I wouldn't allow myself to think of my wife and children or the desperate plight I was in. When the longing to see them would come to me I would drown out the thoughts in drink. My health remained good. I was taking on flesh and red veins were beginning to show in my face. My disposition had changed, however. I had always been jovial, but now I was sullen and abusive. I had pawned all my personal possessions, such as a watch, ring and scarf pin. My clothes were in a bad state of dilapidation.

I recalled one evening that I had some life insurance. I went around the next day and secured a loan of \$150 on it. That afternoon I had a strong desire to see my wife and children and I took the evening train for my home in Missouri. I hadn't been in the town more than an hour when I was drunk again. I was drinking to get up nerve to go and plead with my wife to take me back. I saw her, and she fainted at my scarred face and changed appearance. Her father ordered me from the door, and I returned to New York.

My ambition was gone. I didn't want to work. It was at this period that I began using cocaine.

I was sleeping off a debauch in the rear of a saloon when I awakened with what was a forerunner of delirium tremens. I began to shake all over and cold perspiration poured off me and soaked through my clothes. My throat felt as if it was closing. There came over me a feeling of fear.

A disheveled man sitting at a table watched me for a few moments and then came over to me. He took from his vest pocket a little box containing a white, flaky substance.

"Here, Bo," he said, "take a sniff of this. It'll brace you up."

I knew it was cocaine, but I didn't falter. I snuffed a pinch up my nostrils and in a very few minutes I felt its effects. Things took on a rosy hue. I became talkative and hopeful. I would reestablish myself in the world. I bought the remainder of the box of cocaine from my companion for a dime and then there enlisted in the ever growing army of cocaine fiends.

It is certainly no trouble to secure cocaine in New York, especially if you are known as a "coke." Among the men who use it it is known as "snow" and one particular fiend who consumed more than any one else on the Bowery was known among his fellows as Sleigh Bells. There are scores of unscrupulous druggists who will sell you the drug without asking questions. They look you over first. If you use it they can tell and they do not hesitate to sell.

There are cocaine peddlers in every congested tenement district. I know one pedler who is said to have amassed a fortune and is also said never to have used whiskey or drugs. In the major-

ity of instances, however, the peddlers are users of the drug. I was continually in fear of arrest and often bought boxes of cocaine that I did not need and hid them around my person. Jail had no terrors as long as I had the drug.

How I lived I could not tell now. I know that I always secured enough money to buy cocaine and a little food and I slept in hallways, alleys, wagons, stables and parks.

When I was in very pressing need of money I would go to any one of the second hand clothing stores, exchange my clothing for something a little bit worse and get a few cents for the difference. One raw February morning in a driving snowstorm I walked from the Battery to Chatham Square. I had on no underwear and was wearing a worn out pair of shoes with no socks. All that protected me was a summer pair of trousers and a blue gingham shirt.

During that same bitter cold week I gouged off two gold crowns from my teeth and pawned them for 30 cents. You can pawn anything on the Bowery. One Bowery character used to pawn his wooden leg every Saturday night and redeem it some Sunday newspaper.

These cheap pawnshops are a curse to the man who is down and out. In many instances he could not get whiskey if it were not for these places.

After three years with cocaine I was growing thin and scrawny. My flesh was pasty and I had a peculiar twitching of the eyelids which gave me a wild look.

I used to get off by myself and while in the throes of cocaine write poetry, although I had never been of a literary turn of mind. I got the idea that my weird, absolutely nonsensical attempts at poetry would sell and I went the rounds of newspaper offices, but never got any further than the first door, when I was ordered out.

An impediment came in my speech and I talked jerkily and at times my sentences were disconnected. I found a solvent of some livelihood at one time by acting as sort of messenger boy for a gang of pickpockets, the leaders of which are now in Sing Sing. I was eating less all the time and getting thinner. I don't suppose I weighed more than 100 pounds. My clothes felt about me like those thrown about a scarecrow.

I never knew the day of the week and at times I could not recall my name. My eyelight had got so dim that I never attempted to read and knew absolutely nothing of what was going on in the world. I had long since lost track of my old associates.

One night I slept in a cellar of a saloon with a man who had at one time been a New Jersey banker. He had fallen through drink and was a "coke." We had a fairly sensible talk lasting long into the night, recounting our past. It was the only time I had ever become communicative. I was aroused in the early dawn by a loud report. I sat up and rubbed my eyes—my banker friend had shot himself through the head.

In one particular place on Park Row a man may spend the night sitting at

Was a Prosperous Business Man Until He Started Liquor Habit—Confident of Establishing Himself in What He Calls Civilization.

the table and sleeping with his head between his hands if he buys a "shock," a 5 cent glass of whiskey, before the doors close. A place like this in the early morning is like a cage of wild beasts.

The craving for the early morning drink is on. The men are bleary eyed and gasping for breath and the language is the most terrible one can imagine. I heard one man curse his mother for half an hour because she allowed him to be born. There is no spark of camaraderie among such men as one will find on the park benches, where the unemployed congregate. Friendship is unknown.

I was a cast-off even in the lowest depths of the underworld. They jered at me in 5 cent barrel houses. How I managed to keep out of prison is a mystery, for I would steal anything I could get my hands on. I had no moral sense. I would tell the most extravagant lies when the truth would have served my ends better.

My life as a drunkard and cocaine fiend lasted for six years. I believe I was in the incipient stages of tuberculosis, as my sleep was constantly troubled by violent fits of coughing. My start back to what I call civilization began three years ago. I cannot but believe it was an act of Providence and I wish to say now that I have more faith than ever before in a Supreme Power.

I was in one of the lowest dives in Park Row, in fact I had not been out of it for two days. A sailor with a bankroll had come in and I was sticking to him like a leech. He was particularly domineering, but I obeyed his every whim. He was what we call a "live one."

He gave me money to buy all the cocaine I wanted and I was stocked up. My brain seemed actually to be on fire one evening and I took a sudden dislike for the proprietor. He was a rough bully and was later murdered by his mistress. I lurched up to him and cursed him when he would not treat the house.

He looked at me a moment and called out to the rear to his bouncer. That worthy came on the run. "Throw him out, I don't wanna dirty my hands," he ordered. The bouncer picked me up bodily—I was a mere child in strength—and literally threw me out to the gutter. He followed after me and snarled: "Ye're a disgrace to this joint."

I had fallen on my back and lay there for several minutes to get back my breath. His statement that I was a disgrace to the place brought home to me in a vague sort of way the foul depths I had reached. I got up and walked in the direction of Fulton street. A great calmness came over me. My past, aided by the dying stimulus of

the cocaine, was rushing before me in a kaleidoscopic manner. It was as if a 5 cent glass of whiskey, before the doors close, had been poured over me.

At the corner of Fulton street, Broadway a great feeling of self-loathing came to me. Tears coursed down my cheeks and a great lump came in my throat. I fell to my knees and in an incoherent manner prayed for help. I walked over to the curb and sat down and allowed myself to think of my wife and children. What a life I had had! I sat there until the early morning workers began pouring out of the place and way exits.

I asked one man for a dime to go to the hospital. I said: "I think he believed me, for he gave me 50 cents and directed me to the nearest hospital. I went there and remained there for three weeks in the time in a delirium. I felt like a madman and nurses and only a merciful chance was saved by my jumping out of the window to the asphalt court below."

Every nerve was screaming. I came. I was soothed temporarily by mild injections of morphine. My terrible visions came to me and I was awakened with screams that were the entire neighborhood. I was always clutching at my throat, trying to pour molten iron down my broken off five teeth at the time I broke my jaws together.

Finally I began to be able to longer stretches of time and of these lucid intervals I managed to nurse to write a letter to my wife. She came on the next day and was convinced that I was a broken away from my old life and had convinced my wife.

After a time I was taken to Missouri, where I saw my wife and children. They looked at me pitifully. I was a pathetic spectacle. Not a word came near me. I remained in Missouri more than a year and fought my way, but I still lingered, although I was growing less and my power of resistance was growing stronger. Once I went to Kansas City purposely to buy cocaine. I could stand it no longer. I took a drug in my pocket and suddenly it hit into a sewer opening. I won that day. I went back to New York. It is only recently that I have returned to New York, where I began all over again. My health is improved in health somewhat, but I am left in me. Now I do not know if I shall ever fall again—there is a dreadful spectre before me.

I am confident I can reestablish a certain niche for myself in the world and if I can there is hope for any man.